OPINION

BY NAEEM SADIQ

Deathly processes

IT is often said that every process has at least three versions. How the bosses think it works, how it actually works and how it ought to work. Let us consider just one routine process of how millions of Pakistanis obtain a death certificate. Our discussions with numerous senior bureaucrats revealed a stark disconnect — between the gruelling delays, confusion and endless formalities of the real process, and the neat, sanitised version that exists in the minds of process managers. This article focuses on the guaranteed merciless torment that the surviving family must undergo while struggling against a sadistic bureaucratic obstacle course, merely to get a routine death certificate.

The paragraph below describes the currently practised procedure for securing a death certificate in Pakistan.

a) Begin by completing a complex bilingual (Urdu and English) form (obtained after paying Rs200). It may be safe to say that more than 95 per cent citizens find it impossible to fill this form without seeking outside help; b) provide a hospital-issued death report — if the death occurred in a hospital; c) produce an original burial report from the graveyard; d) if more than one month has passed since the death, present an affidavit on a Rs100 non-judicial stamp paper, attested by an oath commissioner — who perhaps knows nothing about the death or the deceased. This step certainly takes many days and much more than Rs100; e) if the death occurred at home, obtain yet another affidavit on a Rs100 stamp paper, get it attested by both the oath commissioner and the local councillor, and attach a doctor's note confirming the death. This could easily take another week or so and many more hundred rupee notes — some not entirely over the table; f) attach CNIC photocopies of the deceased, the applicant and all legal heirs; g) obtain a Family Registration Certificate from Nadra and attach it to the growing stack of documents; h) secure an NoC from every legal heir — a process that could take months, especially if relatives live in different cities or countries. This certificate, too, should be provided on a Rs100 stamp paper; i) adding salt and indignity to injury, the cantonments also require the last tax paid receipt of the house you live in.

Citizens may either spend months and thousands of rupees navigating this convoluted bureaucratic maze or pay touts and lawyers to endure the paperwork and endless runarounds on their behalf. There are others who simply give up — choosing not to report the death at all, rather than subject themselves to this ordeal. The data for the past three years suggests only about one-third deaths having been actually reported to Nadra. Likewise, nearly 60 per cent births remain invisible, either forever or until the child enrols in school — if at all.

On the one hand, the state is meticulously fixated on documenting every arrival and departure at airports — stamping, photographing and recording every passenger. The obsession reaches absurd levels when yet another officer at the final counter rechecks the already checked passport, as if not trusting the earlier verifications. On the other hand, the state refuses to understand and execute its primary responsibility of monitoring and recording millions of arrivals and departures (births and deaths) that take place outside the airports.

It is imperative for the state to rethink and reform its approach. It ought to be the duty of the state to itself monitor and record all births and deaths in the country — without compelling the citizens to chase offices, notaries, affidavits, stamp papers, or signatures from clueless Grade-17 officers. Why remain hostage to antiquated laws when a digital network linking all hospitals, graveyards, and Lady Health Workers to Nadra could do the job seamlessly? Does no one in the government understand how the QR codes work?

> Getting a routine death certificate is a complex process.

Finally, the state must ensure that birth and death records are automatically linked with all relevant databases and departments. Every birth or death event should trigger nationwide notifications and actions such as stopping pension payments, blocking Sims, cancelling CNICs, freezing bank accounts, and informing agencies including the FBR, education, health, social welfare, Bureau of Statistics, population ministry, municipal bodies and police. The technology for such integrated databases has been available for decades. Pakistan too can eliminate bureaucratic roadblocks, reform its processes and fast-track towards a people-friendly future. ■

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BY ZARRAR KHUHRO

Melos to Maduros

NOTHING truly fundamental has changed in humanity. Sure, we traded skins for suits and spears for smart bombs but at our core we have remained largely the same, especially when it comes to the dynamics of power, arrogance and empire.

There is nothing new under the sun; watching the Trump administration, flushed with victory after its kidnapping of Venezuelan president Nicol s Maduros, exult in the admittedly unmatched military might of the US army, one cannot help but recall what Thucydides wrote in the Melian dialogues some 2,500 years ago. Speaking from the perspective of the arrogant Athenians as they threatened the small island of Melos: "the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must." Considered the cornerstone of 'political realism' the quote encapsulates the mood prevailing in Washington, D.C., where power is the ultimate arbiter and appealing to morality, norms and law (as the Melians did) is to be despised and mocked. The ultimate arbiter of what is right and moral is now the US president himself, and only him. "The only thing that can stop me is … my own morality. My own mind," says Trump. This is instructive, given the state of both his morals and his mind. But while we can be appalled, perhaps even a bit terrified that even the Assyrian warrior kings provided more justifications for their actions than Trump does, we should not be surprised.

After all, this is the America of Pete Hesgeth and Stephen Miller, the latter of whom recently brushed off Danish concerns about an American seizure of Greenland, saying "you can talk all you want about international niceties … but we live … in the real world that is governed by strength…force…that is governed by power".

It was an unconscious echo of Pompey during the Roman civil war. Around 80 BC, Pompey laid siege to the Italian city of Messanna and when the governor of that city appealed to Roman law, telling Pompey his siege was illegal and that his forces must be withdrawn Pompey responded: "Cease quoting the law to men with swords."

In a sense, the honesty is refreshing, and the reaction in Europe at least is amusing. Consider that when the Maduros were taken, European countries responded with the 'we are monitoring the situation' line of diplomatic nonspeak, along with the ritualistic references to democracy, international law, human rights and free and fair elections.

But when Greenland again entered the chat, those very same countries recoiled in horror. Denmark in particular is aghast, and rightly so, given that this is possibly the most obsequiously Atlanticist and pro-US of all the European countries. Now we see the spectacle of Danish leaders and analysts reminding the US that their country has supported America's past imperial wars, as former Danish parliamentarian Martin Henriksen complained, tweeting: "I am also surprised that an American president can refer to an ally in that way when we have sent Danish soldiers out into the world to kill Islamic terrorists before they could hit the USA." This complaint reminds me of the old Twitter joke: "I never thought leopards would eat MY face," sobs the woman who voted for the Leopards Eating People's Faces Party."

Nor has it dawned on Europe that its unstinting support for Israel's genocide and repeated violations of whatever remains of international law means that their protests now fall on deaf ears. After all, this is the world they themselves have helped build, more through action than inaction, and now they face the consequences. It's also amusing to see Trump tell Denmark: "The fact they had a boat land there 500 years ago does not mean they own the land."

> 'Cease quoting the law to men with swords'.

The error here is that Europe somehow forgot the eternal lesson that Empire knows no allies, it knows only subjects and vassals. And there is no doubt which category Europe is in when it comes to the world according to Trump.

There are lessons for Empire as well, and these too are as old as recorded history. Take the case of Athens, so arrogant in its treatment of Melos: the Athenian military captured the island, massacred the men and took the women and children as slaves, but the afterglow was short-lived; buoyed by victory, the following year Athens launched an expedition to subdue the island of Sicily and failed miserably. The Athenian forces were utterly routed with the result that, in a decade, Athens was forced to surrender to their Spartan rivals. Similarly, Pompey, so proud with his sword unsheathed, eventually died alone and betrayed when the tide turned, as tides tend to do.

But this is cold comfort; for now, the US remains and will continue to remain the world's pre-eminent military power with the unique ability to project power anywhere in the world, and more than its enemies, it is its allies who should beware. ■

The writer is a journalist.
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FROM THE PAST PAGES OF DAWN

1976 | Fifty years ago

Indian trade team

KARACHI: Two rounds of talks were held yesterday [Jan 11] between Pakistan and the visiting Indian trade delegation on ways and means to expand trade between the two countries. The Chairman of the Trading Corporation of Pakistan, Mr. Riaz Ahmed Naik, led the Pakistan delegation and Mr. Vinod Parekh, Chairman, State Trading Corporation of India, headed the Indian delegation. The two delegations reviewed the progress of trade between the two countries. … …[T]he two sides also … identified goods which could be exchanged… . …Mr. Riaz Naik said that Pakistan wanted to develop, extend and strengthen commercial relations between the two countries. … …Mr. Vinod Parekh[] reciprocated the sentiments… . — News agencies

[Meanwhile, according to news agencies in Peking,] Hundreds of thousands of Chinese wept and held small bunches of white paper chrysanthemums as a sign of mourning for China's late Premier Chou En-lai when his body was taken through the streets of Peking today [Jan11]. Some estimates put the crowds lining the streets at one million. … During the past two days, Chinese leaders and representatives of China's 800 million people had filed past Mr Chou's body in the hospital.

1951 | Seventy-five years ago

Tax on zamindars

KARACHI: In order to enlist the support of the landed class in the industrialisation of the Province, the Sind Government has proposed to levy an industrial tax on all the big zamindars of Sind, it was learnt here today [Jan 11]. The cess which will be charged at the rate of about 12 1/2 per cent of the land assessment, will bring about 25 lakhs of rupees to the provincial exchequer every year and will be utilised by the Government in purchasing shares in various industrial ventures, now under its considerations, on behalf of the cess payers.

The minimum land assessment on which zamindars are to be charged the industrial cess will, however, be fixed later.

Besides this capital, the Government of Sind is also understood to have asked for a big loan from the Pakistan Government for industrialisation of the Province. Two of the major industrial plans which the Provincial Government is to submit to the Government of Pakistan are a textile factory in Hyderabad district costing an initial expenditure of about Rs 1,50,00,000 and a cement factory at Kotri, costing about 50 lakhs. — News agencies

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

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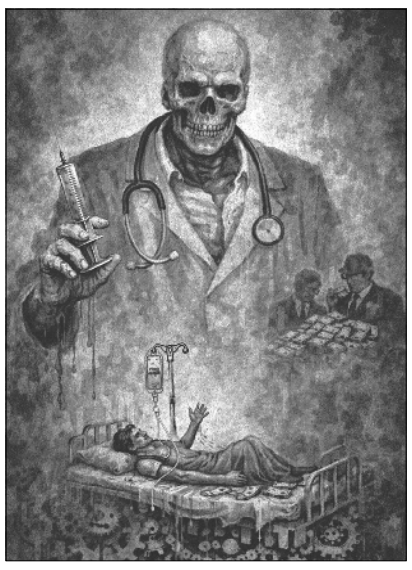
Letters may be edited for purposes of clarity and space. All letters should carry the writer's address, CNIC and phone numbers.

A seriously broken healthcare system



IN Pakistan's major cities, falling ill is no longer just a health concern — it is a financial gamble. Visiting a private or semi-private hospital has increasingly become an exercise in paying first and wondering later. Doctor consultation fees, diagnostic tests, and follow-up charges have climbed so high that medical care now feels less like a service and more like a revenue model designed to extract maximum payment from already distressed patients.

A single visit to a specialist in an urban private hospital routinely costs several thousand rupees. What follows is almost predictable: an avalanche of tests, blood work, scans, imaging, sometimes even full-body diagnostics, worth tens of thousands of rupees and even more. These tests are often prescribed after a consultation that lasts barely a few minutes. The justification? Rule out everything.

Then comes the most absurd part of the process: the 'window' to show reports. In some hospitals, patients are granted three to five days to return with test results, if you miss the deadline by even a day, the consultation fee must be paid again just to show reports that were ordered by the same doctor. In many other facilities, there is no clearly stated window at all, leaving patients at the mercy of reception desks and hospital policies that change depending on mood, management or money.

Let us be honest. This window is not designed for patients' comfort or clinical necessity. It is uncomfortably short, inconsistently applied, and financially punitive. Illness does not run on appointment schedules, laboratory delays are common, and patients are often juggling work, family and transport. Yet, the system shows little flexibility.

Adding to this frustration is another widely shared patient experience: doctors often address only the first problem that is mentioned by the patients. Attempt to discuss a second health issue, and it is subtly, or sometimes bluntly, dismissed. The unspoken message is clear: new problem, new appointment, new fee. This transactional approach erodes trust and reinforces the larger perception that healthcare has become fragmented by design.

The cost implications are staggering. For someone earning a salary still considered comfortable by Pakistani standards, a single medical issue can seriously disrupt the annual budget. For households without employer health insurance, this is unsustainable. For the poor, it is catastrophic. Many simply delay treatment, hoping symptoms would resolve on their own.

Public hospitals, unfortunately, offer little relief. Overcrowded facilities, unavailable tests, broken equipment, and discouraging staff attitudes push patients towards private hospitals despite the costs. The choice is no longer between good and bad healthcare, it is between expensive and inadequate care.

So, where is the government? Provincial health commissions exist, but effective regulation of private consultation fees and diagnostic charges remains largely absent. We seem content to let the market decide, even when the market clearly exploits vulnerability.

Healthcare is not a luxury; it is a basic right. When patients are exploited, something is fundamentally broken. How much sicker and poorer must people become before the system is questioned?

Maryam Zahra
Karachi

Undue harshness

THE recent razing of the popular bird market in Lahore caused widespread consternation among local bird-lovers. Located near Bhaati Gate outside the walled city, the bird market had for long been a vibrant spot, attracting collectors of exotic and fancy birds.

The operation to launch the Bhaati Chowk remodelling project was conducted by joint teams of the Lahore Development Authority (LDA) and the Traffic Engineering and Transport Planning Agency (Tepa). The idea was to reduce traffic congestion, and to control pollution.

Area shopkeepers accused the Punjab government of killing dozens of birds and other caged pets. Although the government denied the allegations, a number of videos circulating across the social media spoke to the contrary. The market comprised about 150 shops, and all of them were demolished during the early morning operation with heavy machinery under police watch.

The action has raised concerns about the livelihood of the traders, many of whom depended entirely on the market for their income. For them, the sudden razing of the market represents not just the loss of property, but of generational businesses and community networks.

Fawad Hashmey
Lahore

AI's future

ARTIFICIAL intelligence (AI) is speedily becoming popular as more and more people use it to save some time. As a consequence, it is now impossible to say with certainty whether a particular video clip is fake or real. We know that there are many people who go berserk when they see videos of their womenfolk dancing or even photos in which they are seen seated next to men who are not their close relatives. What if someone posts on social media a fake video or 'edited' photo of a woman who has rejected his advances, and sends it to her relatives?

At another level, things have got so bad that it is now impossible to even talk to others without getting into an argument. If, for example, I mention a video of a cult leader saying something controversial, the immediate response is, 'it is probably AI-generated'.

Of course, there is a positive side to it as well. In schools, we were taught that political and religious topics should be avoided when talking to both friends and strangers. That is what we all should practice now during our social media interactions. The only safe thing left is sports, like, say, cricket. I know for sure that I will not be lynched if I say that a particular cricketer does not deserve to be selected for the next tour.

A much more serious problem is likely to surface in a few decades from now. Fortunately, I will not be alive then. When robots become increasingly like humans in appearance, how will someone know if the man or woman talking to them is real?

Shakir Lakhani
Karachi

Rebuilding civility

IN a world that has become increasingly intolerant and harsh, we should consciously work on rebuilding civility. As a society, we are drifting away from the core values of kindness, respect and patience, which form the pillars of good character. The Muslims, particularly, should remind themselves that Islam lays great emphasis on moral conduct, directing us to be compassionate and treat others with dignity. Patience, humility and forgiveness are the qualities that, if practiced, can heal segregations within society.

As a professional teacher, I believe that children learn not from sermons, but from the behaviours they observe in adults, especially parents and teachers. Therefore, the elders should set examples for the younger generation to follow. When adults speak kindly, practice patience in disagreements, and offer a helping hand to others, they inspire the young to follow the same path.

Rebuilding civility is not just a necessity, it is a moral duty. We, as a society, should return to the noble values of respect, kindness and good manners in order to to nurture a more empathetic society.

Aysha Khan
Karachi

Banking torture

WHEN I was a child, about 82 years ago, I read that if somebody placed a few hundred rupees in a bank, after many years, he would receive thousands. These days if you do not take any money out of your savings account for six months, your account is likely to be blocked. While any

withdrawal through the ATM or by cheque is notified, no notification is sent when an account is blocked. During this phase, in case you issue a cheque to any organisation or individual, that is likely to be dishonoured even if you have half a million rupees lying idle in the bank account.

Another problem is related to the mandatory verification for pensioners. For the last several years, elderly government pensioners like me are required to have their biometric verification done twice a year. If this verification is delayed, the account is blocked, causing perfectly avoidable discomfort to the account holder.

For elderly persons, when the fingerprints are difficult to scan, personal appearance along with the CNIC should be considered sufficient. Ever since the State Bank of Pakistan issued a special directive to take extra care of the elderly persons, some measures appear to have been taken, but the problems mentioned here still need to be addressed.

S.K.H. Mahmood
Karachi

▶ **PUBLIC LIBRARY:** This is with reference to the report "Bannu's historical library needs restoration" (Dec 23), which was followed up by the editorial 'Historical footprints' (Dec 24), lamenting the plight of the library. I have been trying to get in touch with some official at the library as I wish to donate some books because, according to the report, the library has not received any books since 2001. So far, I have not been able to get hold of anyone. Let the flame of hope stay lit.
Tughral Yamin
Islamabad

▶ **POPULATION DATA:** This is with reference to the report 'Pakistan to enter 2026 as fifth-most populous country' (Dec 31). According to the 2023 Census, Pakistan's population had already exceeded 241 million, while United Nations estimates suggest that by mid-2025, Pakistan's population had reached 255.2 million. Worldometer's elaboration of the latest UN data on Dec 31, 2025, suggested the country's population was 257.1 million. Pakistan's ranking by population has been constantly increasing; 10th in 1975, eighth in 1990, sixth in 2000 and fifth in 2010. UN projections suggest that by 2040, Pakistan will be the fourth most populous country in the world.
Dr Mehtab S. Karim
President, Population Association of Pakistan
Karachi

▶ **POWER OUTAGES:** The residents of Block-12 in Karachi's Federal B Area have been facing prolonged power outages without an end in sight. A few weeks ago, power supply to the area remained suspended for 12 hours for maintenance work, but no technical staff were seen in the area. It is worth mentioning that the revenue collections by K-Electric (KE) from the area is over 75 per cent, but about two months ago, the utility company had connected a major part of Block-12 to a feeder meant for nearby slum area that remains under heavy loadshedding. It seems the KE is free to enjoy full immunity under the wings of the National Electric Power Regulatory Authority (Nepra).
Hasan Afzaal
Karachi

External Ombudsman

Veteran journalist Muhammad Ali Siddiqi is *Dawn's* External Ombudsman (DEO). His duty is to attend to our readers' complaints, and to respond to them professionally. DEO is the investigating authority to whom all complaints can be referred, and it is DEO who takes notice of any alleged violations of *Dawn's* code of ethics, and informs the Editor for appropriate action.
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